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Crisis Communication Changed Forever by Social Media (Do the Positives Outweigh the Negatives, and How Can Social Media Make Our Society Feel Safe?)

As new technology advances, so does the way society communicates. Crisis communication has adapted alongside social media and plays a role in affecting one another. What we already know about the relationship between the two mainly comes from personal experience. We are the generation stuck in between heavily relying on social media every minute of the day and those who did not grow up in a digital world. Therefore, we have experienced the change in communication tactics first hand. We know that social media has had a huge impact on the way information is shared, but we would like to see how the positives compare to the negatives. Should we be worried with all the changes that are being made to our society or should this somewhat new way of alerting the public of danger online alleviate the fear of emergency situations?

BACKGROUND AND SECONDARY RESEARCH:

Over the past 15 years Social Media has become a pivotal part in emergency communication. With each kind of emergency come different characteristics within the social media networks. According to the article, "Socializing in Emergencies—A Review of the Use of Social Media in Emergency Situations” in the *International Journal of Information Management,* as of 2014, “Facebook was the largest social media network, with 1.35 billion monthly active users” (Simon pg. 612). Twitter is becoming a very popular place to get information. This article also expresses, “On Twitter, 36% of the users receives news from friends and family, while 27% from news organizations” (pg. 12). One concern with this transformation of an information source is that it all relies on having an internet connection, but there are many other options such as fixed-line and WiMax (Yin, pg. 53). For example during even when the area’s physical infrastructure was completely destroyed in the Haiti earthquake of 2011, the cellular tower bounced back quickly, which allowed survivors to request help from local first responders and emergency managers to relay important disaster-related information through social media sites (Yin, pg. 53).

Talk about how emergency response has changed over time due to social media from 9/11 to Boston Marathon.

Talk about negative negative effects of the change (not extensively)

PRIMARY RESEARCH METHODS AND FINDINGS:

We created a survey on Surveymonkey.com in order to get an idea of where people’s perspectives lie about the effect of social media through crisis situations. By asking questions such as “what form of social media do you get your news information from?” to “do you agree or disagree that social media causes confusion?” we got many responses and even comments about the subject.

        When reading about news through social media, many people don’t know whether to believe what they are reading or not. Until news is released through a newspaper, television, or radio, many people look at what they are reading through social media and disregard it. Through the results of our survey, there are many unreliable sources that cause readers to not necessarily believe everything that they read on social media. We believe that this has come from people on social media making crisis situations seem more than what they are. On social media, you also have the people that post about how they feel about crisis situations. These types of people often spread false information about nation-wide or worldwide disasters. People then don’t know what to believe; therefore they have a hard time relying on social media for news information.

        However, through the results of our survey, many people agreed that social media has a positive effect and is the fastest way of spreading information. Hence, why during crisis situations, people find out exactly what is going on through their social media accounts. These social media accounts include Facebook, twitter, and instagram. When crisis situations occur, people look to their phones to tell them exactly what is going on. Many news organizations have their own accounts for this reason exactly. In our survey, many people agreed that social media accounts were the fastest way to spread information; therefore these news organizations tweet or put out a Facebook post to inform the readers. Raising awareness is another reason why social media has such a positive effect on spreading information. This is even more pertinent when something dangerous can be happening locally, like a shooting or robbery. These quick read tweets can save many lives, simply by keeping people from being in the wrong place at the wrong time and by helping them avoid the dangerous situation.

        Our survey taught us that there are people out there that will spread false information, making it harder for readers to believe in the news that is being put on social media. However, our survey also taught us that there is a simple solution to getting the correct information needed through social media: simply follow news organizations on social media. This will give readers the quick tweets and posts that are accurate. Then, watching the television or waiting for the news to be in the newspaper won’t be completely necessary to get true information in a flash.

        In order to get a perspective from someone who has the authority and credibility to share correct information over social media about crisis situations, we interviewed Lieutenant Cameron Wassman, Dispatch and Support Operations, from the Central Michigan University Police Station. We prepared with a list of questions along the lines of how social media plays a role in our society before setting up the interview. As we found from our secondary research, there were a variety of positives and negatives that contribute to the way society shares information over social media; so we wanted to find out if this is in fact the best way to alert people of emergencies and to raise awareness of critical events. We began with asking how he thought social media has a role in crisis situations? He responded with saying that it is huge, especially on college campuses in which social media is the place where most students get their information (Wassman). Similar to our survey we conducted, he agreed that Facebook and Twitter were the most common sites that crisis information is communicated. Though, he stated that their department was fairly late to the social media game. They started using Twitter and Facebook to in 2013 with their username as “cmupd”. Since then, he said that they have not had to use it very often for major crisis, but they have found it to be extremely helpful.

Also, he generously shared his PowerPoint presentation with us on crisis communication that he presents to classes around campus. On this presentation he explains that a crisis is “any event that is, or expected to lead to, an unstable and dangerous situation affecting an individual, group, community, or whole society.” (In order to have a dependable source of information the post should answer three questions: what happened, who is affected, and what is being done? Along with answering these questions, real time follow-up information crucial to keep the public informed. Compared to times before social media the information from press-releases were on news stations and the internet, but social media has caused such an incredible change in response times. As for the students on campus, Lt. Wassman believes that timeliness of being able to send out information is the main key. Their department has received the “go” from university communication and public relations— this is impetrative for the need of valid information to be spread rapidly. He explained, “CMU has their emergency notification system with text message and phone calls, and we have linked that system to our social media, so as soon as we are to send something out it automatically posts to our Twitter or our Facebook… With the time it takes to make those phone calls or to send that text message, people are able to see it on social media much quicker.” As well as helping the public to be informed, the information flows back from the public to the police department to. A very interesting point that Lt. Wassman made was if they are looking for a suspect for a crime, they can post on their Facebook and Twitter page asking for help from the public to gain more information on a broader scale. Recently, on March 23, 2016, CMU Police Department Tweeted, “MISSING STUDENT:  Joshua Thomas Palmer, White Male, 23 years old, 140 lbs, 5-foot-9, slender build, with short red hair,” along with more information attached from when he was last seen and if anyone had any information that they are encouraged to contact the police over the phone (CMU). On April 1, 2016, the cmupd account reported on twitter that he was found and that his family was notified; as well, the department thanked everyone for their help. Because of these factors, he hopes that people will look toward organizations such as this one, rather than random people sharing incorrect information.

        Overall, he agreed the the positives certainly outweigh the negatives of crisis communication being shared over social media. Nevertheless, it is important to be aware of the downfalls it can have. The biggest hurdle to overcome is getting people to “like” and follow the account. He responded with, “You want to try and keep people engaged with your social media, especially when there are not crisis happening, you have to keep people interested.” Another downfall is having to address people who put a negative comment with their name tagged in it. Because they cannot force anyone to take these negative comments down, they must address them in such as way that allows for the credibility to stay dependable. One major concern we had from our secondary research, was how social media might cause people to cause chaos in order to receive the attention they are looking for. We asked what his thoughts were on this problem, and if he thought it was a real problem in the first place. He responded with saying, “Yes, I think so on varying levels.” In further detail on the matter of shootings and acts of violence, in some ways sharing their story is giving into their goal of being talked about around the nation or in more serious cases, around the world. Since it is a very real possibility, the way to combat this problem would be to stop sensationalize and glamorizing the information provided about the situation. The reason why social media is so powerful in crisis communication is because it provides safety to the public, which overrides the idea that the criminal or terrorist group is getting what they want – attention.

DISCUSSION:

When I was in high school there was a shooting at another high school nearby, Arapahoe High School. A student seeking revenge against the debate teacher brought a gun into the school. Clair Davis was a victim to the students gunshots that resulted in her life as well as his own. I remember getting home early from school on December 13, 2013, and checking my Twitter feed; I was startled to see emergency alerts that my friends had shared stating that Arapahoe was on a lockdown due to a shooting. Clair was in critical condition fighting for her life in the hospital when the hashtag “#Get1DtoClair” was created on many social media sites. She loved the band One Direction, so the students of Colorado helped to make her story go viral in the hopes of helping her meet the boy band. They were not able to make it to Claire before she passed away, but they were able to send her a video with their their wishful prayers for her to get better and for her family to stay strong. Spreading information through social media can shine a positive light on something very negative going on in our world. In the situation like Claire’s, many people were able to show Claire and her family how important they were to the community around them. Need more here. (purpose would be to alleviate the fear of these types of situations- to walk through a hypothetical situation to show them).

Talk about Paris attacks

Social media has many positive and negative qualities when dealing with the spreading of information through crisis situations. However, it seems that the positives can outweigh the negatives in many ways. Spreading information quickly raises awareness to what is going on around people, to help prevent further disaster. We believe that researching the effects that social media has on crisis situations was very important because readers will understand that we can use social media in a positive light. Users of social media can spread awareness to others and raise money and brighten the lives of people who have gone through trauma. By doing these things through social media, the world can become a better place and be more of a help when disaster strikes. Then, someday we can take this positive influence from social media through crisis situations and hopefully put an end to any of the negatives that could come from it.

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(Need citation from survey?)